

Documents on Diplomacy: The Source

Address Before the Pan-American Conference

Calvin Coolidge, Havana, Cuba, January 16, 1928

Mr. President and members of the Pan American Conference: No citizen of any of the Americas could come to the queen of the islands of the West Indies without experiencing an emotion of gratitude and reverence. These are the outposts of the new civilization of the Western Hemisphere. It was among them that the three small ships of the heroic admiral came when, with the assistance and support of Spain, Columbus presented to Europe the first widespread, public, and authoritative knowledge of the New World. Other points may have been previously visited, but for these was reserved the final revelation. The great discoverer brought with him the seed of more republics, the promise of greater human freedom, than ever crossed the seas on any other voyage. With him sailed immortal declarations of independence and great charters of self-government. He laid out a course that led from despotism to democracy. Edward Everett Hale, a seer of New England, tells us that this gallant seaman who rose above the storms to become the forerunner of an age of pioneers,

“Left blood and guilt and tyranny behind, Sailing still west the hidden shore to find; For all mankind that unstained scroll unfurled, Where God might write anew the story of the world.”

In the spirit of Christopher Columbus all of the Americans have an eternal bond of unity, a common heritage bequeathed to us alone. Unless we together redeem the promise which his voyage held for humanity, it must remain forever void. This is the destiny which Pan America has been chosen to fulfill.

As we look back over the accomplishments of the past four centuries we can see that we are warranted in asserting that the Western Hemisphere has not failed in the service that it seemed destined to render to humanity. Progress does not go forward in a straight line. It is a succession of waves. We can not always ride on their crest, but among our republics the main tide of human advancement has been steadily rising. The people have taken charge of their own affairs. In spite of some temporary discouragements, they have on the whole been successful. The fertility of a virgin soil, a wealth of mineral deposits, an abundance of water power, a multitude of navigable rivers, all at the command of a resourceful people, have produced a material prosperity greater in amount

and more widely distributed than ever before fell to the lot of the human race. The arts and sciences have flourished, the advantages of education are widespread, devotion to religion is marked by its sincerity. The spirit of liberty is universal. An attitude of peace and good will prevails among our nations. A determination to adjust differences among ourselves, not by a resort to force, but by the application of the principles of justice and equity, is one of our strongest characteristics. The sovereignty of small nations is respected. It is for the purpose of giving stronger guaranties to the principles, of increasing the amount and extending the breadth of these blessings, that this conference has been assembled.

The very place where we are meeting is a complete demonstration of the progress we are making. Thirty years ago Cuba ranked as a foreign possession, torn by revolution and devastated by hostile forces. Such government as existed rested on military force. Today Cuba is her own sovereign. Her people are independent, free, and prosperous, peaceful, and enjoying the advantages of self-government. The last important area has taken her place among the republics of the New World. Our fair hostess has raised herself to a high and honorable position among the nations of the earth. The intellectual qualities of the Cuban people have won for them a permanent place in science, art, and literature, and their production of staple commodities has made them an important factor in the economic structure of the world. They have reached a position in the stability of their government, in the genuine expression of their public opinion at the ballot box, and in the recognized soundness of their public credit that has commanded universal respect and admiration. What Cuba has done, others have done and are doing.

It is a heavy responsibility which rests upon the people and the governments represented at this conference. Unto them has been given a new land, free from the traditional jealousies and hatreds of the Old World, where the people might come into the fullest state of development. It is among the republics of this hemisphere that the principle of human rights has had its broadest application; where political freedom and equality and economic opportunity have made their greatest advance. Our most sacred trust has been, and is, the establishment and expansion of the spirit of democracy. No doubt we shall make some false starts and experience some

disappointing reactions. But we have put our confidence in the ultimate wisdom of the people. We believe we can rely on their intelligence, their honesty, and their character. We are thoroughly committed to the principle that they are better fitted to govern themselves than anyone else is to govern them. We do not claim immediate perfection. But we do expect continual progress. Our history reveals that in such expectation we have not been disappointed. It is better for the people to make their own mistakes than to have some one else make their mistakes for them.

Next to our attachment to the principle of self-government has been our attachment to the policy of peace. When the republics of the Western Hemisphere gained their independence, they were compelled to fight for it. They have always been a brave, resolute, and determined people, willing to make any sacrifice to defend what they believed to be their rights. But when once their rights have been secured, they have been almost equally solicitous to respect the rights of others. Their chief efforts have been devoted to the arts of peace. They have never come under the delusion of military grandeur. Nowhere among these republics have great military establishments ever been maintained for the purpose of overawing or subjugating other nations. We have all nourished a commendable sentiment of moderate preparation for national defense, believing that for a nation to be unreasonably neglectful of the military art, even if it did not invite and cause such aggression as to result either in war or in abject humiliation, it must finally lead to a disastrous disintegration of the very moral fiber of the nation. But it is one thing to be prepared to defend our rights as a last extremity and quite another to rely on force where reason ought to prevail. The form of our governments guarantees us against the Old World dynastic wars. It is scarcely too much to say that the conflicts which have been waged by our republics for 150 years have been almost entirely for the purpose of securing independence and extending the domain of human freedom. When these have been accomplished, we have not failed to heed the admonition to beat our swords into plowshares.

We have kept the peace so largely among our Republics because democracies are peace loving. They are founded on the desire to promote the general welfare of the people, which is seldom accomplished by warfare. In addition to this, we have adopted a spirit of accommodation, good will, confidence, and mutual helpfulness. We have been slow to anger and plenteous in mercy. When this attitude prevails it is not difficult to find practical means of adjusting differences. The statesmanship of the southern American Republics has shown a peculiar skill and aptitude in this field. It began with mutual consultation. The first Pan American Congress assembled at Panama City about 100 years ago. The

purpose of that gathering has never been forgotten, and it may be said to have marked the beginning of a permanent institution. The Republics south of the Rio Grande have produced a most impressive record of a resort to mediation, arbitration, and other peaceful methods of the adjustment and adjudication of their international differences. A study of their treaties will disclose some of the finest examples of mutual covenants for the limitation of armaments and the avoidance of hostile conflict. In the discovery of the true principles of international relations, and in the practical ability of putting them into effect, they have demonstrated a moral power and strength of character for which the whole world should be profoundly grateful.

The Pan American conferences meet for the purpose of maintaining and extending these important principles. It is impossible to conceive of a more inspiring motive which men could entertain in dealing with the affairs of this world. You have convened to take counsel together for increasing the domestic welfare of the free people of our independent Republics and promoting international peace. No other part of the world could provide constituencies which all have such a unity of purpose. The whole atmosphere of the conference is animated with the spirit of democracy and good will. This is the fundamental concept of your organization. All nations here represented stand on an exact footing of equality. The smallest and the weakest speaks here with the same authority as the largest and the most powerful. You come together under the present condition, and the future expectation, of profound peace. You are continuing to strike anew note in international gatherings by maintaining a forum in which not the selfish interests of a few but the general welfare of all will be considered.

If you are to approximate your past successes, it will be because you do not hesitate to meet facts squarely. We must consider not only our strength but our weaknesses. We must give thought not only to our excellence but to our defects. The attitude of the open mind must prevail. Most of all, you must be guided by patience, tolerance and charity, judging your sister nations not only by their accomplishments, but also by their aspirations. A Divine Providence has made us a neighborhood of republics. It is impossible to suppose that it was for the purpose of making us hostile to each other, but from time to time to reveal to us the methods by which we might secure the advantages and blessings of enduring friendships.

Like the subjects which have occupied the attention of your predecessors, the topics contained in the agenda of the present conference call for cooperative international action. They belong to the class of inquiries that produce closer international relations,

promoting the good of all in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. Your predecessors have shown great wisdom in directing their attention to the matters that unite and strengthen us in friendly collaboration -- subjects that develop an inter-American unity of sentiment which alone can make our common endeavors fruitful.

The existence of this conference, held for the consideration of measures of purely American concern, involves no antagonism toward any other section of the world or any other organization. It means, that the independent republics of the Western Hemisphere, animated by the same ideals, enjoying the common blessings of freedom and peace, realize that there are many matters of mutual interest and importance which can best be investigated and resolved through the medium of such friendly contact and negotiation as is necessary for cooperative action. We realize that one of the most important services which we can render to humanity, the one for which we are peculiarly responsible, is to maintain the ideals of our Western World. That is our obligation. No one else can discharge it for us. If it is to be met, we must meet it ourselves. We must join together in assuring conditions under which our republics will have the freedom and the responsibility of working out their own destiny in their own way.

The proceedings of the successive Pan American conferences reveal a record of achievement which, without attempting the spectacular, constantly builds on the solid foundation of the immediately attainable. With each succeeding conference the agreements for the orderly settlement of such differences as may arise between the American republics have been extended and strengthened, thus making their relationship more certain and more secure. Each conference has contributed its share toward developing more intimate cultural ties among the nations of this hemisphere, and establishing new currents of mutual understanding. Obstacles to closer economic relations have been removed, thus clearing the pathways of commercial intercourse.

Of scarcely less importance have been the many special conferences which from time to time have assembled for the purpose of dealing with the more technical questions in the relations between the republics of America. The meetings of the International Commission of Jurists, the Pan American Highway Conferences, the Child Welfare Conferences, the Sanitary Conferences, the Conference on Consular Procedure, the Scientific Congresses, the Financial Conferences, the Red Cross Conferences, and the highly important and significant Congress of Journalists have all served to strengthen that spirit of Pan American solidarity which, in the last analysis, represents one of the greatest achievements of our American civilization and one which, in the

future, is destined to play so important a part in the fulfilment of the high mission intrusted to the republics of this hemisphere.

It has been most gratifying to witness the increasing interchange of university professors and the constantly growing stream of student migration from one country to another. No other influence can be more potent and effective in promoting mutual comprehension of national aims and ideals. It is sincerely to be hoped that this cultural interchange will with each year assume larger proportions.

It is not desirable that we should attempt to be all alike. Progress is not secured through uniformity and similarity but rather through multiplicity and diversity. We should all be intent on maintaining our own institutions and customs, preserving the purity of our own language and literature, fostering the ideals of our own culture and society. In a territory reaching from the north temperate zone through the Tropics to the South Pole, there is room enough to carry worthy activity which is profitable and every ideal which is good. Our geographical location, as well as our political ideals, has endowed us with a self-contained unity and independence. Instead of considering our variations as an obstacle, we ought to realize that they are a contribution to harmonious political and economic relations.

In this great work of furthering inter-American understanding, a large responsibility rests upon the press of all countries. In our present stage of civilization, knowledge of foreign people is almost wholly supplied from that source. By misinterpreting facts, or by carelessness in presenting them in their true light, much damage can be done. While great progress has been made toward the publication of fuller information and unbiased views, a better exchange of news service would do much to promote mutual knowledge and understanding. What happens in this hemisphere is of more vital interest to all of us than what happens across any of the oceans.

An increase of information depends largely on an increase in the means of communication. During the entire nineteenth century intercourse between the American Republics was exceedingly difficult, and this isolation proved a serious obstacle to closer understanding. The twentieth century, however, and especially the last 10 years, have witnessed astonishing changes in this respect. Transportation by water has become rapid, comfortable, and relatively inexpensive. Shipping facilities from the United States have been largely improved. Our Government is greatly interested in increasing their efficiency. Railway lines have been extended so that it will soon be possible to travel with practically

no interruption from the northern border of the United States to the southern border of El Salvador, and in South America from Peru to Patagonia. During very recent years every government of this hemisphere has been giving special attention to the building of highways, partly with a view to establishing feeders to the railway lines, but also to provide great arteries of inter-American communication for motor transport. On the wall of my office hangs a map showing proposed highways connecting the principal points of our two continents.

I am asking the United States Congress to authorize sending engineering advisers, the same as we send military and naval advisers, when requested by other countries, to assist in road building. These gratifying changes are about to be supplemented by the establishment of aviation routes, primarily for the transportation of mails, which will afford to our Republics a channel of interchange which will find its ultimate expression in closer cultural and commercial ties and in better mutual comprehension. Our Congress also has under consideration proposals for supporting such air routes. Citizens of the United States are considering installing them.

Private organizations of a civic, cultural, and educational character also have a great opportunity to help in the development of a closer understanding amongst the nations of America. The fine cooperation of the Red Cross Societies of the American Continents is an outstanding instance of the field for service open to the civic and philanthropic organizations of this hemisphere.

In the domain of commercial relations the last few years have witnessed an extraordinary strengthening of the economic ties binding together our republics. In both agricultural and industrial production the countries of America are now complementing one another to an unusual degree, resulting in an increasing exchange of commodities. Furthermore, recent years have witnessed a most gratifying rise in the standards of living of the wage earners throughout the Americas. They enjoy a greater productive and earning capacity, with a consequent increase in their purchasing power which has been reflected in the growing volume of interAmerican commerce, destined to become more and more important as it combines a scientific utilization of natural resources with an increasing economic power of the masses of the people. The greater a nation becomes in wealth and production the more it has for the service of its neighbors, the larger its markets for the goods of others. The operation of natural forces, supplemented by the conscious purpose of the governments and peoples of the Americas, has increased their mutual interest in each other and strengthened the commercial ties among them.

In this work of inter-American cooperation an important part has been played by the Pan American Union. It stands as the permanent organ of these conferences. This international organization has labored unceasingly to give effect to the treaties and resolutions adopted by the successive conferences. Its scope of usefulness is constantly being enlarged and its ability to serve the American Republics is strengthened with each year that passes.

In the area of political relations the results have been no less gratifying and even more significant. It is almost impossible fully to appreciate the remarkable record achieved by the republics of America in the settlement of the differences that have arisen among them. Because of ill-defined boundaries of the sparsely settled political subdivisions of the old Spanish colonial empire, the independent states of America carved out of it fell heir to a large number of territorial disputes which, in many cases, were of an exceedingly delicate and difficult nature. It is a tribute to the spirit of good will and mutual accommodation which has dominated the relations among the nations of the Western World that most of these disputes have been settled by the orderly process of negotiation, mediation, and arbitration. The adjustment of international differences on the American Continents has happily advanced to a stage at which but few questions remain unsolved. This extraordinary record of achievement places heavy responsibility upon the present generation to advance the great work that has been so auspiciously begun.

It is a high example that we have set for the world in resolving international differences without resort to force. If these conferences mean anything, they mean the bringing of all our people more definitely and more completely under the reign of law. After all, it is in that direction that we must look with the greatest assurance for human progress. We can make no advance in the realm of economics, we can do nothing for education, we can accomplish but little even in the sphere of religion until human affairs are brought within the orderly rule of law. The surest refuge of the weak and the oppressed is in the law. It is preeminently the shield of small nations. This is necessarily a long, laborious process, which must broaden out from precedent to precedent, from the general acceptance of principle to principle. New activities require new laws. The rules for the governing of aviation are only beginning to be considered. We shall make more progress in the end if we proceed with deliberation. No doubt you will find in your discussions many principles that you are ready to announce as sound and settled rules of action. But there are certain to be other questions concerning which it is not possible at the present time to lay down a specific rule of law. This need not discourage anyone. It

is rather the most conclusive evidence that the results which have been secured are not of a temporary and ill-considered nature, but a mature statement of sound and conclusive principles.

The founders of our Republics sought no peculiar preferment for themselves. That same disinterested spirit which has animated the conduct of our past conferences has given the American family of nations a high place in the opinion of the world. Our Republics seek no special privileges for themselves, nor are they moved by any of those purposes of domination and restraints upon liberty of action which in other times and places have been fatal to peace and progress. In the international system which you represent the rights of each nation carry with them corresponding obligations, defined by laws which we recognize as binding upon all of us. It is through the careful observance of these laws which define our rights and impose our duties that international cooperation is possible. This lays on us all a continental responsibility which none of us wish to avoid and the fulfillment of which is one of the most important guaranties of international friendship.

While the law is necessary for the proper guidance of human action, and will always remain the source of freedom and liberty and the ultimate guaranty of all our rights, there is another element in our experience read that "The letter killeth but the spirit giveth

life." Oftentimes in our international relationship we shall have to look to the spirit rather than to the letter of the law. We shall have to realize that the highest law is consideration, cooperation, friendship, and charity. Without the application of these there can be no peace and no progress, no liberty, and no republic. These are the attributes that raise human relationships out of the realm of the mechanical, above the realm of animal existence, into the loftier sphere that borders on the Divine. If we are to experience a new era in our affairs, it will be because the world recognizes and lives in accordance with this spirit. Its most complete expression is the Golden Rule.

The light which Columbus followed has not failed. The courage that carried him on still lives. They are the heritage of the people of Bolivar and of Washington. We must lay our voyage of exploration toward complete understanding and friendship. Having taken that course, we must not be turned aside by the fears of the timid, the counsels of the ignorant, or the designs of the malevolent. With law and charity as our guides, with that ancient faith which is only strengthened when it requires sacrifices, we shall anchor at last in the harbor of justice and truth. The same Pilot which stood by the side of the great discoverer, and the same wisdom which instructed the founding fathers of our Republics, will continue to abide with us. ■

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